

VIOLENCE AGAINST SEX WORKERS IN PORTUGAL

Differences Between Indoor and Street Sex Work

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Identify and characterise the agents, forms and contexts of violence against sex workers, as well as the respective protective strategies implemented by them.

Design and Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 female street and indoor sex workers. Through qualitative analyses, the data was summarized and reorganized in several sub-categories, and intersected later on. We obtained two general categories: one concerning the characterisation of violence (agents, forms and contexts) and another regarding protective strategies against violent behaviours.

Results: The forms of violence and their respective perpetrators differ according to the places of the sex work itself. Street sex workers are more exposed to the risk of physical violence on the part of clients, in comparison to indoor sex workers, and are more often victims of discriminative and offensive behaviours by the community, such as verbal insult and physical aggression. In both outdoor and indoor places, it was observed that the dynamics and rivalry between sex workers are, in themselves, a source of violence. The strategies deployed as protection in the face of violence are complex, manifold, and vary according to the work place and the existing dynamics between sex workers.

Conclusions: In spite of this study contributing to a better understanding of aggression processes and sex workers' victimisation, this matter warrants further study drawing on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

INTRODUCTION

Prostitution can be understood as engaging in sexual activity in exchange for payment, a practice carried out mostly by women, in a conscious and consensual manner, where sexual services are performed on clients in exchange for money or something of value (Monto, 2004). The term “sex worker” has gained some prominence in place of “prostitute” due to its less derogatory and stigmatising effect (WHO, 2012), which is why it will also be favoured in this poster. The offer of sexual services can take place in public outdoor venues or indoor venues (Raphael and Shapiro, 2004). Studies have shown that acts of violence against sex workers, mostly female, takes a number of different shapes: physical, psychological, sexual and economic (Karamouzian et al., 2016; Nixon et al., 2002; Oliveira, 2004). In present day Portugal, as far as the legal framework is concerned, there is no legislation whatsoever regarding sex work. Since 1983, all criminal charges for sex workers have been removed from the Portuguese Criminal Code (Graça & Gonçalves, 2016). The non-existence of legislation on sex work (with the notorious exception of pimping) has brought about an unfortunate legal vacuum and heightened the vulnerability of sex workers, especially in outdoor venues, a fact directly linked with the violent behaviours these women are often victim of (Oliveira, 2004; Oliveira, 2011).

OBJECTIVE

The main focus of this study was to identify and characterise the agents, forms and contexts of violence against sex workers, as well as the as the protective strategies implemented by them in the course of their occupation.

DESIGN AND METHOD

Interviews	Qualitative Analyses	Characterisation of Violence	Protective Strategies
20; 10/street; 10/indoor	1st STAGE: Provisional Line by Line Coding 2nd STAGE: Initial Codes Reanalysed and Generically Categorised 3rd STAGE: Emerging Sub-Categories were Summarized and Intersected	AGENTS - Clients - Community - Other Sex Workers FORMS OF VIOLENCE - Physical Violence - Verbal Violence - Psychological Violence	- Intuition - Sex Workers' Support - First Contact

RESULTS

STREET SEX WORK

CLIENTES

Physical Violence: Punching, pushing, slapping, beating, kicking.

COMMUNITY

Verbal and Psychological Violence: Insults, as well as other discriminative attitudes and behaviours.
Physical Violence: Throwing of objects, mainly rocks and water bottles.
Robbery by individuals pretending to be clients.

OTHER SEX WORKERS

Physical Violence: Often practised in group and usually aimed at expelling a woman from a given area.

CHARACTERISATION OF VIOLENCE

CLIENTS

Violence by clients was perceived by sex workers as one of the main risks associated with their occupation. Street sex workers, in comparison to their indoor counterparts, are more exposed and vulnerable to episodes of physical violence on the part of clients.

COMMUNITY

The stigmatisation and discrimination on the part of the community is, for the interviewees, the most negative and impactful aspect of their occupation, particularly in street sex workers. This important difference in terms of victimisation arises mainly from the greater exposure street sex workers have shown in the face of violent behavior.

OTHER SEX WORKERS

In both contexts, rivalry and competition between sex workers was perceived as one of the main reasons for conflict. Most of the times the catalyst for conflict pertains to matters regarding fees, sexual practices offered and even time spent with clients.

INDOOR SEX WORK

CLIENTS

Physical Violence: Shoving.
Psychological Violence: Publicly revealing the sex workers' occupation

COMMUNITY

Verbal Violence: Abusive phone calls.

OTHER SEX WORKERS

Physical and Verbal Violence: Minor conflicts originating from the breaking of household rules or personal belongings stolen.

PROTECTIVE STRATEGIES

INTUITION

When questioned about steps or strategies used to guarantee their safety, most sex workers mentioned intuition as their best weapon. Sex workers stated that certain physical traits, as well as body language, were seen as important aspects in the screening of a client. Street sex workers showed concern over the soliciting location and, subsequently, the spot where the sexual intercourse is to take place. Other women, working in outdoor venues, mentioned the features of the car of a client as another protective factor, both in terms of their intuition and protection and in terms of the actual license plate.

SEX WORKERS' SUPPORT

Sex workers mentioned that working in close proximity with other sex workers was, in itself, a protective measure against violence. Several indoor sex workers admitted having strong bonds with other women working in the same flat. Sharing information between sex workers was also identified as an important means of protection. It should be noted that a less evident complicity was observed between street sex workers, in comparison to their indoor counterparts. Still, there is a sense of mutual help between sex workers soliciting in the same area.

FIRST CONTACT

The first contact was universally considered the critical point for client screening, as it demands a swift evaluation on the part of the sex workers. Street sex workers usually offer their services near the soliciting area, inside the clients' cars, with whom they usually only engage in a short conversation before entering the clients' vehicles. On the other hand, indoor sex workers have the opportunity to establish several interactions with their clients. The first contact is usually over the phone. Communication is always present, even during sexual intercourse. Interviewees stated that verbal communication takes a crucial role in keeping a client calm.

CONCLUSIONS

Personal relations between sex workers and their clients, the community and even their peers are quite complex and can sometimes escalate into violent behaviour. Although interviewees tend to perceive violence as something inseparable, and even intrinsic to their occupation, we were able to differentiate between such types of violence and their agents, as well as the way this perception varies according to the setting where sexual services are offered. This study also allowed us to confirm that sex workers, in both street and indoor venues, adopt several strategies as a protection against violence. Concerning direct measures against violence, although we could identify common aspects, there are also significant differences in the adopted strategies according to the venue and setting of work. It would be unwise to generalise victimisation and risk perception experiences, given the diversity of the surveyed population, although such generalisations can be widely found across the available literature. There is a clear need for further, in-depth research focusing on the protective strategies implemented by sex workers against violence, mainly concerning the diversity of sex venues and agents involved, and taking into account the social and cultural differences within the sex workers' population.

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